

THE FOURTH WATCH

I.

But the boat was now in the midst of the sea, distressed by the waves; for the wind was contrary.



In Elizabeth's old garret play room there were still traces of that positive and conscientious little person who had held Romy Biznet the worst boy in town, praying for him under that head, tearfully or vindictively, according to the standing of their permanent quarrel; tearfully when he smoked cigarettes secretly, vindictively when he snowballed her all the way home from school, kissed her at the gate while she cried, and departed with shrill yells.

The faded pink roses of the wall paper belonged to that time, and so did a row of fashion-plate ladies pasted in a dim corner, each with her name laboriously written above her head. There were a small blue rocking chair and a doll's trunk; no more than this of Bessie Heathway. The stratum of another personality overlay everything, for of late years her husband had taken it for his den during the summers, and all was as he had turned the key upon it six months before; a table with orderly pile of music paper, accurately placed blotter, ink and pens; a few torn pages of neatly written manuscript in the waste basket; a divan glowing with a Navajo blanket; a tray of coffee things on a tabourette. Everything bore witness to his methodical habits, without trace of wakeful nights and disordered dreams, of despair that had seen the sunset in the asylum windows on Pasture Hill, and watched the slow progress of the stars until the Adirondacks flushed with sunrise.

This, then, was the room in which poor Elizabeth sought sanctuary, bringing there an armful of old college text-books, because she had heard that study was a remedy. One must in some sort try for direction in a sea of trouble, and if Euclid had any method for keeping one away from the red house on the hill, it would be well to understand it. Or one might

translate a tragedy—the Oedipus, for example—with the Furies.

The window-sill was level with the floor, the roof meeting the low casing so that one could not stand upright. Here she had sat and made doll's clothes, singing school songs and telling stories to herself about the mountains. There had been palaces and fairies, she remembered, but nothing at all resembling that red house crouched high on the hill, seeming hung like a blotched spider above the tree tops of French Hollow. Its windows blinked in the afternoon sun. His was at the left; the one at the end, on the second floor.

She laid aside Euclid and the tragedies and wandered about the room, sighing and stealthy, removing the half year's bloom of dust, trying to decipher the torn manuscript, filling the samovar. She opened the doll's trunk: red cheeks, blue glass eyes, ineffaceable smile, half a dozen ill-made garments of a bygone pattern, and on the sawdust bosom ashes of a sentimental rose placed there by little Bessie Heathway. Mask, sawdust, and illusion—emphasis and symbolism of all other cheat and futility. She found in herself no tenderness for dead childhood and the happiness that could thrive on these slight things—only a heavy wonder at its having been possible.

She relocked the trunk and lay down upon the window seat with its gay Navajo blanket, her head propped upon her arm, steadily watching his distant window while it reddened with sunset, darkened and shone out again through the dusk.

Pasture Hill goes well enough in the landscape when you get the blueness of distance in front of it, but to walk upon it up Pleasant Street is to perceive how it is barren beyond all hope—dry sand that ages have vainly tried to cover decently, out at elbows forever, no matter how strongly its coat of coarse grass is woven.

They called it "Pleasant Street" out of their hopes and good intentions, planting young trees at intervals in the shifting

sand to indicate how a road was to wind gently under arching elms, but the years add nothing to the stature of these trees, and the most they can do year by year is to put forth a sickly show of green—"I'm not dead yet."

All the rest of the hill is smooth, so that when you look up from Cosmos it is as if Pleasant Street were a yellow river charted on a green map, the asylum a red mark to show a city.

Elizabeth thought that by walking up Pleasant Street she might tire out the nervous thrill in her wrists, but she had forgotten her umbrella, and so must journey between a glare overhead and a glare underfoot until her eyes were dazzled and her head hot and confused.

One seemed forever climbing through dust and heat, both actually and allegorically, and at the end of the journey—well, not exactly a "House Beautiful."

For one followed the straight and narrow way so far as one could perceive it, and turned aside into no inviting pasture in order to find the Doubting Castle of Giant Despair. Square across the road lies Doubting Castle, with the skulls about it of former wayfarers, which who runs may read.

Through the quiet intensity of the sunlight a light breeze sent gliding white pillars of dust toward her. *Were* they pillars of dust? For the world was strange, and changed so that one hardly knew which was allegory and which was real. Or did she see pillars of dust for the first time truthfully, how there was terror in them and meaning: "We are ghosts of dead eternities going from one nothingness to another."

A sudden animal fright caused her to start aside from a light eddy whirling past her harmlessly, gracefully: "From nothing to nothing. Come with us!"

The matron asked, like a gardener with choice roses of his own raising in a nearby greenhouse: "Wouldn't you like to go through the women's ward while they are getting him ready?"

She was a broad-shouldered person, the matron—tall and strong. No weakness had ever touched that splendid physique. She had a low forehead and a heavy chin, sleek, fair hair and narrow, grey eyes that

saw, without appearing to, everything in the corridor the moment she entered.

There were rocking chairs all along the sides of the hall, rubber plants, artificial palms at intervals, imitation Persian rugs set at careful angles on the shiny floor, and an odor of iodoform and peppermint throughout.

"You see we make it homelike," said the matron proudly. "Stop biting your finger nails, Mrs. Jackson. Do you want me to tie on those mittens again?"—this to a lank and drooping figure in blue calico and a starchless bonnet. A colourless face looked up dimly and drooped again, but the distorted fingers obediently clasped themselves in her lap and there twisted about and about aimlessly, patiently.

"Farmer's wife," said the matron. "You'd be surprised how many farmers' wives go insane. Loneliness and hard work."

Another farmer's wife was knitting (with wooden needles), counting aloud monotonously like the ticking of a clock.

Then there was a stout, red-faced woman with bloodshot eyes, who smiled foolishly, showing a wide gap where her front teeth had been. Nightmares smile so, when something huge and hideous is portending, something that you think at first is funny.

"We aim to make it homelike," chanted the matron, the floor creaking under her tread as she passed between the rows of chairs. Elizabeth followed, slim and black robed, peering fearfully from face to face. Suddenly a bluish, bony hand shot out and clenched into a fold of her skirt. It belonged to a tiny, somnolent creature who sat, toad-like, with her feet tucked under her. In the face now upturned there was, as Elizabeth noticed among many of the others, a curious twitching of the mouth corners, a constant flicker of the tongue along the lips. The eyes seemed looking at her from a great distance, and when the voice came it was fine and remote: "You're Alice, aren't you?"

"No," said Elizabeth. She put her warm hand on the hooked fingers gently. It was like touching something dead. After the first quiver, however, she gathered the poor alive and dead thing into

her palms and sat down in an empty chair, drawing it close. The far-away eyes brightened, though ever so faintly.

"I'm glad you've come, Alice."

The matron turned, missing her follower.

"Oh, come, come, Mrs. Bradley. This won't do, you know. It does credit to your kind heart, Mrs. Biznet, but really, you can't do any good. She's better off by herself. She sits that way for hours. She always thinks visitors are some of her folks."

"I'll wait here," said Elizabeth simply. The vague face staring through dreams grew more intent. Elizabeth smiled encouragingly at it, and stroked the inert hands again and again.

"I get very despondent," murmured the voice. "There was some one coming for me."

The forehead contracted painfully.

"Is the baby well?"

Elizabeth knew of but one baby. She forced a white-lipped smile.

"The baby is well." For so one may speak of such as need never reckon with the world's perplexities.

One of the dead hands, loosening from her clasp, patted her cheek. Alice's baby, of course—but the question had come very strangely.

"There, there!" soothed the creature. "There, there."

Elizabeth sat quite still, with a great horror knocking at her breast, and the cry that of late had grown habitual sounding in her brain. If she became like *these*, she reflected, the cry would become audible. She saw herself seated among these women of the rocking chairs, moaning with mechanical regularity: "O God, the pain of the world! O God, the pain of the world!"

"If you are ready, Mrs. Biznet"—the matron was smiling down at them, showing her strong white teeth genially. "Mustn't annoy visitors, Mrs. Bradley—I'll take you down to the reception room. You'll be surprised to see how well he is looking and as good as a baby. This way, please."

"*O God, the pain of the world!*" The words sighed through the bright varnished room as though Elizabeth had at last spoken them. She kissed the alive

and dead face, which grew vague again, and withdrew within its veils as she went away.

"O God, the pain of the world!"

The doctor's office was clean and bright. There was the glisten of much varnish; the rugs on the shining floor were laid at æsthetic angles.

Directly opposite Elizabeth hung an engraving of Doré's "Christ Leaving the Praetorium." She remembered reading that a latter-day philosopher had diagnosed the case of the Master of the World Himself as megalomania, calling Him the king of such madmen as claim divinity. She did not quarrel with the idea or accept it, but studied attentively, as one under a mental strain observes the pattern of wall paper, the tragic figure descending the steps, the centurions keeping back the people with their spears, the outcropping here and there in the crowd of a disciple's scared and despairing face. These and the moulded pattern of the cheap gilt frame were stamped into her brain before she heard the double tread in the hall of Biznet and his attendant.

She knew his step as she knew his face, but realised for the first time its strangeness, how it was singularly without weight, irregular, hesitating, unlike the rhythmic stride of a man who knows where he is going and why.

She shut her eyes for an instant, dreading to see him altered, dreading still more that he should be the same as ever.

"Well, Bess." His harsh voice was good natured enough. He came forward and kissed her in a dutiful way.

The attendant was a huge, bull-necked German, sleepy-eyed, with very clean and muscular hands. He stood clumsily behind Biznet's small, withered figure for an instant, towering like an exaggerated shadow, then slouched over to the window, yawned comfortably, and began to manicure his nails. Biznet watched him out of the sides of his eyes.

"He won't lend *me* his knife," he muttered. The attendant heard, and grinned, as at a witty saying.

"Are you comfortable here?" she asked. There was little to say, after all. The situation had no precedent. It seemed to demand some new code of eti-

quette with which she was unfamiliar. She felt irritably self-conscious, dreading the opinion of that sleepy-eyed monster so carefully putting his hands in order.

"Comfortable! Oh, I suppose so. You didn't send me here to be comfortable, did you?"

It was the familiar, accusing tone. Elizabeth put her hand to her throat.

The attendant's knife snapped shut; his narrow eyes waked up ever so slightly, seeking her face with a warning expression.

"But for your notions I could still be in the world doing my work. I had planned so much—"

The attendant hitched his chair forward a little.

"You haf worked a lot already since you came here," he said encouragingly.

"Will you mind your own business!" snapped Biznet. "I guess I can talk to my wife without you putting in your oar. It's quite true, however, that I have been working. I write all day. If I could write faster—"

He fell into a reverie.

"I should like to see what you've done," she said at length.

"You! You couldn't understand."

"Is it a symphony?"

He looked up with flaming eyes, but his voice was soft and monotonous:

"A symphony! It is all the symphonies that can be written. I have thought them all out. It is only the writing of them now. When I have finished there will be no more music to write. As long as the world lasts they will have to play my music and mine only. There have been hours at a time when my mind has been so clear that I could hear and understand it all at once—clear to the end of the permutations and combinations of all the scales and all the instruments. . . .

"I'll tell you who I *would* like to see, though. *She* doesn't think I have delusions. Tell *her* that I am writing all the music of the world. I'd like to hear her sing. Not that I can't remember, or that it was anything extraordinary in a way—only something about it always gave me ideas. There was in it what one hears just as one wakes up—the voices that talk inside one's ears and rustle away

over the pillow. There was something in her face, too—she was so young—it made one almost crazy to think of its ever fading. Now, you always scowled. She never did—but once her eyes were wet. I think it was because she was sorry for *us*."

He stopped, came close to her and touched her face with the air of one who tests a thing to see whether it is shadow or substance.

"You are pale and old—my fault—but not altogether. It was the little wearing details of every-day life—as disembodied spirits, Paolo and Francesca, 'blown about the world,' we should have done very well—"

Then he began suddenly to curse the world and all its customs, flinging his arms about, raging like a man caught by inexorable machinery. His voice grew shrill and inarticulate. The attendant sprang forward, and Doctor Nevannion, quiet, impersonal, sane, softly entered and briefly took charge. . . .

"That's a remarkable woman," he thought, observing Elizabeth. With lowered eyes she methodically drew on her gloves, while the clamour receded down the long hall.

"You regard this as a hopeless case, do you not?"

"There is always *hope*," said the doctor gravely.

"Is there?" She looked at Dr. Trevannion long and searchingly; then, absent-mindedly, as one looks at a wall-paper pattern, at the impotent figure with the conventional blur of light and the sharp points of thorns about its head.

"Hope—" she shook her head with a slight smile, said good-bye formally, and went out again into the sunlight.

II.

And in the fourth watch of the night He came unto them, walking upon the sea.

The blue and wooded shoulder of Mount Phelim rises back of Pasture Hill. A scar of red sandstone, too abrupt to afford roothold to any green thing, can be easily seen from the village, and is pointed out with some pride as "Deer's Leap," a real precipice and of tragic history.

When Pleasant Street leaves the asylum it turns off at an angle, descends through the sand of the other side of the hill, crosses the doubtful bridge of a mucky little brook and then clammers up Mount Phelim hand over hand, becoming more wild, jagged and overgrown at every step until it joins at right angles a wood road that runs horizontally about the mountain, and following this eastward, one goes warily, because at one point where the forest opens out and shows you the world and the kingdoms thereof, from Cosmos clear across the St. Lawrence to Montreal and the sunset, Deer's Leap is at your feet, and pine needles are slippery footing.

Here Elizabeth had often come in quest of sunsets. She and her husband had sat there in the days of their youth and somewhat fitful happiness, dreaming great things out of the colour and the quiet and the small voices of birds.

On this evening, also, she had the sunset in mind, but only as an incident of the journey, the real purpose of which lay much farther on. As far, in fact, as the rocks at the foot of Deer's Leap. Whether they also would prove to be but an incident of the journey she wondered a little, but did not much care.

If there was no other road to take, why—there was no other, and the incident was closed to further argument.

By the time she reached the pine needles and confronted the elfin beauty of that great picture—all things seemed infinitely little and dainty, except the sky—the glamour of the sunset was upon it, and she seated herself in the warm hollow of a pine-tree's roots. One would not intrude one's death upon a world so entirely lovely at such a moment. It would be a courtesy, like talking and laughing during music. And so she waited until the stars came out together with a small, new moon.

How huge the trees were! As it grew darker they were terrible. "Intolerable mystery!" they whispered when the wind went through them, then would hold their breath, and again "Intolerable mystery!" Somewhere a hermit thrush was late at his prayers, using other words, but as twilight darkened into night he lost the thread of his argument, without having

reached any conclusion, and the stars, growing thick and bright, agreed with the tree-tops—"Intolerable mystery!"—while Elizabeth stared up at them in the manner of all sorrowful and puzzled people these many thousand years.

And so staring she fell into that unhappy sleep familiar to those in great physical or mental distress; a sleep not altogether sleep, which leaves one hesitating in two worlds at once. She knew that she was not awake, because she could not move. Grim dreams would presently come out of the forest behind and swarm up from the rocks below Deer's Leap, but the day's reality had been so grim that she was hardly afraid of phantoms, and she was so near to becoming a phantom herself. No, there was nothing now to be afraid of.

A little sound began, whether far away or within her ear she could not be sure, but there was no doubt about its being her husband's 'cello. It increased dreadfully, and the tree trunks—as if they had been so many organ pipes—took up the theme, making of it thunder and the scream of living things in pain; yet through the confusion was an insistent rhythm, as of hammer and anvil, or the beating of a heart—hammer and anvil, shaping some huge tool with which to carry on whatever work it is that the universe is about. Then *he* stalked by, seeming to know very well what he was about, waving his baton as she had seen him wave it scores of times on the conductor's stand. "He has really done it, then," she thought—"all the music of the world."

She tried to call to him for help, but could make no sound, and by degrees the trees were silent again, the tumult of all the world's music died down to a whisper, then to nothing, and she was awake in the rustling silence of the real forest and the real night. It was a waking, however, to thought so vivid that the things she thought about were almost as plainly seen as those of which she had dreamed. Visions rose as if up from the disordered rocks below the Leap and spread in clear outlines against the sky, for in this manner a weary brain may at times think and yet, recognising its pic-

tured thoughts as illusion, remain upon the hither side of insanity.

She saw her husband as she had seen him scores of times, his sleek black head and thin shoulders silhouetted by the light of the conductor's stand—then shrivelled and raving, as he had been that afternoon. She saw her dead child—

"*Why is it?*" she said, meaning suffering, and repeated the question over and over in a whisper. The figure with the thorns and the blur of light stood out against the sky as she had seen it in the picture. Did it have any bearing?

Then she saw the women in the rocking chairs and felt the dead-alive hand dragging against her skirt.

"O God, the pain of the world!"

Somewhere there was singing. She was tired of music. It had been music, music these ten years; great sounds, incomprehensible technical jargon; and he had been so impatient with her ignorance—that impatience which in the end had become violence.

*Erbarmen, erbarmen,
Allerbarmen, ach! erbarmen—*

The sick king, Amfortas, is "symbolic of the world," Biznet had explained in his bored way—"of the world begging to be helped out of the scrape it's got into—"

Durch Mitleid wissend—

The voices came dreamily from the top of the dome. Then it was poor Kundry, with her "dienen, dienen—"

But these things led nowhere, thought Elizabeth, and remembering why she had come to that place, rose and walked

slowly down the gentle slope of shifting pine needles. One laid aside life when done with it. There was neither wisdom nor courage in the long, dull wait for death to come of itself. She stood quite on the edge. A soft grey mist hid the rocks.

He had been of an age to creep about after her, catch her skirts, get underfoot and make himself a nuisance generally—and that was what he did now—or it may have been only a dead branch that caught at her skirt. She stepped backward to free herself, and then—

No, it was not *he* who was crying. The sound was in her brain and in her heart, strong and commanding—the cry of all children who have not mothers: "Come back; we are so many."

She drew away, slowly and with difficulty, from the edge, regained her seat upon the pine-tree's roots and sat long with her face buried in her hands, while a plan of living unfolded before her—stretching through many years, gentle, self-forgetful, dealing with one problem only, the fashioning of one infinitely small fragment of the answer to that eternal question about suffering.

With the sunrise her purpose took on definite shape. While the early colour was veiling the stars, she rose to her feet, arranged her disordered hair, straightened her dress and set her face calmly upon that road that led back into the world.

Everywhere the birds were wild with the joy of living, but her ears were deaf to all sounds but the call of the children that awaited her.

Georgia Wood Pangborn.

